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ABSTRACT

True "liberal learning" often occurs far from our campuses and direct influence. The Ladakhi, a non-western culture located between Tibet, China, and Pakistan, passed on "liberal learning" as part of its communal experience. The Ladakhis were wealthy, self-sufficient, lived in roomy houses, had zero "gross national product," no crime, and much leisure. After other cultures converged on the Ladakhis, many changes took place. Western schools were built with traditional western curricula. The Ladakhi children could no longer survive in their culture after being educated in these western values, showing the centrality of experience to a liberal education. The best education is liberalizing and distinctions made between "liberal arts" and "applied arts" are very likely false. The job of educators is to help illuminate how real life experiences have already been shaped into liberal arts. The job in experiential education is to weld experiential learning options onto liberal arts programs showing the symbolic relationship between liberal learning and human experience. (SM)

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Experiential Learning and the Liberal Arts.

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by

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Abstract

Often, true "liberal learning" is that which occurs far from our campuses and far from our direct influence; this paper examines how one particular non-Western culture, the Ladakhi, preserves and passes on "liberal learning" as part of the cauldron of its communal experience.

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Wedged between Tibet, China and Pakistan, in one of the most remote corners of the world is Ladakh, a country about the size of Ohio, home to 120,000 people. No one from the West ever visited Ladakah until 1975.

One of the earliest Western visitors said when she met the Ladakhi people how inspired and awazed she was to find a people who lived totally outside of Western civilization. This seemingly barren country was organized in perfect balance with nature, a series of skills which must have taken 2000 years to evolve.

Westerners would consider them poor but in their own way the Ladakhis were very rich: they were self-sufficient, lived in roomy houses, had zero "gross national product," no crime, much leisure.

Then, everything changed: Indians, Chinese, Europeans and others came. Schools are being built . . . schools like Western schools which impose an urban, money-making set of values and teach mainly consumerism and consumption. Their children now read badly-translated copies of The Iliad but do not learn how to make shoes or grow barley or build houses. So when they finish school, the children can no longer survive in their culture -- they are made to think that working with their hands is primitive, not modern, beneath their newly-educated contempt. Likewise with food: Ladakhis are taught to believe that imported foods are more "refined." They've been grinding their grains for centuries, but now to be "modern" they buy imported white bread and flour with few nutrients and lots of chemicals. Agriculture specialists have come and educated them to believe that pesticides, fertilizers, and chemicals will help them grow food. Of course, in the long run the expensive imported chemicals will increase water needs, create pollution, invite soil erosion,

wornout soils and hosts of other products. Concrete blocks for building homes are no longer created by the Ladakhi but are now imported. The country is just beginning to see "civilized diseases" such as drunkenness, alcoholism and violence: the first murder took place recently. (If you want more details of this sad story, read the September, 1986 issue of East West Journal.)

My point is not to tell of sad stories of the destruction of traditional cultures. Rather, it is that the Ladakhis were liberally educated people in the finest sense of the word: like the classically educated, they had been free from dependence, free to recreate themselves, free of the thinking of others, free to explore, free from contamination, free to sift through their cultural heritage and pass on what was life enhancing. It was not schooling but experience which educated them. The Ladakhi were able to reflect on their experiences, to create and shape their culture from the communal cauldron of shared experience.

I realize, of course, that a "liberal education" is an essentially Western concept, foreign to a culture like the Ladakhis. However, it is my argument that the best educations are liberalizing and that distinctions Western educators and others make between liberal arts and "applied arts" are very likely false. These seeming distinctions understandably grew along side the growth of educational bureaucracies, and such distinctions refer more to turf than to Truth, to expediency, not educational good sense.

Certainly there is ample justification for such distinctions: due to the shortness of life itself, is it any wonder that education became so compartmentalized? The world has indeed become so complex and

complicated that no one can grasp but a fleeting little part of it. It was Sir Francis Bacon in the 17th century, who, when asked what was his field of interest said "knowledge." He then authored a book about all of human knowledge and called it, De Augmentis Scientiarum . . . The Advancement of Knowledge. They grew them hearty and majesterially back then!

Because the modern world has become complex does not mean that one way of learning is always superior to any other way of learning. After all, it is well to remember that the Classical Western mind made no distinctions between the fine arts and the applied arts: the word "art" originally meant "well made" whether the term was applied to a piece of sculpture, a poem, a chair, or a shoe.

If you will grant my central premise that there is no useful pedagogical distinction between liberal education and other kinds of education . . . the centrality of experience to a liberal education becomes clear. As John Locke observed, "no man's knowledge . . . can go beyond his experience." More to the point, Whitehead argued that all of art "is the imposing of a pattern on experience, and our aesthetic enjoyment [is] in recognition of that pattern." To do philosophy, to do music, to do writing, to do literature, to do history is to experience something. Why else are history, poetry, philosophy, music and all the rest important or meaningful unless they invite experience: do not the cold words of the past thaw out with the help of a human voice. Can music, theatre or poetry even be said to exist apart from the communal experiences of audiences, players, musicians, and writers? Our job in experiential education, then, is not to

wonder if experiential education plays a strong part in the education of a liberal arts major; our part is to help illuminate how real life human experiences have already been shaped into the liberal arts.

Literature is one liberal art replete with some suggestions as to how experiences are linked with the liberal arts. Tennyson wrote in Ulysses, "I am part of all that I have met; yet all experience is an arch wherethrough // Gleams that untravell'd world." All works of art, Rilke writes in his letters, "are indeed always products of having been in danger, of having gone to the very end in an experience to where [a person] can go no further." "I don't like to work," Jim exclaims in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, "[no body] does -- but I like what is in work -- the chance to find yourself. Your own reality -- for yourself, not for others -- what [no one else] can ever know." And who could forget the end of James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Stephen Dedalus, with wild abandon, exclaims art the end of the novel: "Welcome, O Life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." Quite an obligation for his experiences . . . to say the least! One of my favorite poets, e.e. cummings, suggests that useful, creative, humanizing experience has to be positive: no one learn by nots.To cummings, experiences teach most directly: "I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing// that teach ten thousand stars how not to dance."

Thomas Merton, the Trappist and great twentieth-century mystic, seems to have recognized the centrality of experience to being a liberally educated person. When asked what was the use of living a

secluded, contemplative life, cut off from the very world a Trappist supposedly prayed for, Merton replied that to be a human, one had to find that balance between the cerebral and the visceral, the world of pure mind and the world of experiences. Merely to contemplate is to fall victim to narcissism; to lead a purely active, experiential life would be to do violence . . . to act without forethought. The best lives were those which strived for balance between both extremes.

To conclude, our job in experiential education is to weld experiential learning options onto liberal arts programs and to show the inevitable, symbiotic relationship between liberal learning and human experience. It seems reasonably clear to me that, remembering the lessons of the Ladakhi, there is no such thing as an object called <u>education</u> . only <u>educated people.</u> And, allowing for some inxplicable exceptions, education seems <u>only</u> to come from lived experience .